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ABSTRACT

Shortly after a researcher arrived at a Traditional Mohawk (Iroquois) Indian community in New York State in May 1997, seven community members began using the Netscape 3.0 e-mail system with steadily increasing frequency. The researcher was interested in studying the relationship between new communication technology and identity maintenance. E-mail users soon reported a very real and perceivable tension concerning the way they wanted things to "come out," "sound," or "feel." The initial discussion concerns several features of the e-mail system being employed (including the subject field, a prompt associated with the subject field, and the linear, sequential nature of the medium). On the face of it, users' complaints were concerned with the formal way in which text appears on a computer screen. But in addition to the linear array of information manifested on a screen, this notion also refers to the way in which certain software is described as constraining to users' thought processes, and ultimately, their personal communication when using that software. This paper unravels some of the details surrounding the relationship between "Mohawk" and "machine," and aims to track the changes in analytical frame prompted by the complex nature of that relationship. (Contains 3 figures and 25 references.) (Author/NKA)

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"The Ethnographic Approach and Meta-Analysis:
On the Intricacies of Identity Construction among Mohawk E-mail Users"

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"The Ethnographic Approach and Meta-Analysis:
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Abstract

Upon commencement of the fieldwork for this study (July, 1997), several members of a Traditional Mohawk (Iroquois) Indian community began using E-mail with increasing frequency. However, users soon reported a very real and perceivable tension concerning the way they wanted things to "come out," "sound," or "feel." The initial discussion below concerns several features of the E-mail system being employed (including the subject field, a prompt associated with the subject field, and the linear, sequential nature of the medium). On the face of it, users' complaints concerned the formal way in which text appears on a computer screen. But in addition to the linear array of information manifested on a screen, this notion also refers to the way in which certain software is described as constraining to users' thought processes, and ultimately, their personal communication when using that software. This paper unravels some of the details surrounding the relationship between *Mohawk and machine*, and attempts to track the changes in analytical frame prompted by the complex nature of that relationship.

Prologue

A group of four Mohawk families left the Akwesasne Reservation five years ago in an effort to return to traditional patterns of life. Fulfilling a 200-year-old prophecy, they returned to their homelands in the Mohawk Valley in Central New York State in the winter of 1994. This new beginning would be filled with hardship. While their intent was to become a self-sustaining community, in the absence of any monetary support whatsoever, they sought not-for-profit status from the federal government. In the mean time, a friend of the community living near Woodstock set up a web page for the group in an effort to raise general awareness of their plight. Within days of its installation the website was being inundated with E-mail from around world. People wanted to know how they might help – they wanted to come visit, help with construction – and give money. The problem was that replying to these messages turned out to be a very inefficient process. The friend near Woodstock, NY could only print out copies of the E-letters, stuff them in a folder and "snail mail" them off to the Mohawk Valley.

I was interested in studying the relationship between new communication technology and identity maintenance. For a while I looked into Internet Relay Chat (IRC) as a prospective venue for my research. The plan was to take the medium theorist to task, to track some of the many "demand characteristics" associated with computer-mediated communication. I heard about a small group of Mohawk who had recently moved in along a stretch of the Mohawk River about an hour away from the University. Rumors had it that they had one or two computers of some type on site. Here was an opportunity to study the collision of two presumably incongruous "cultures." The oral and the electronic. Having really no idea what was going on down the river, I showed up one day in June of 1997 during a festival the Mohawk had put on. It was the Spring celebration, and it was open to the public. I eventually found Okwahle, the leader, toward the end of the day. He told me that they were looking to get an E-mail connection set up to begin "answering some of those messages coming down to Susan's" themselves. Without relaying too much enthusiasm, I told Okwahle I could help.

Introduction: Two Media

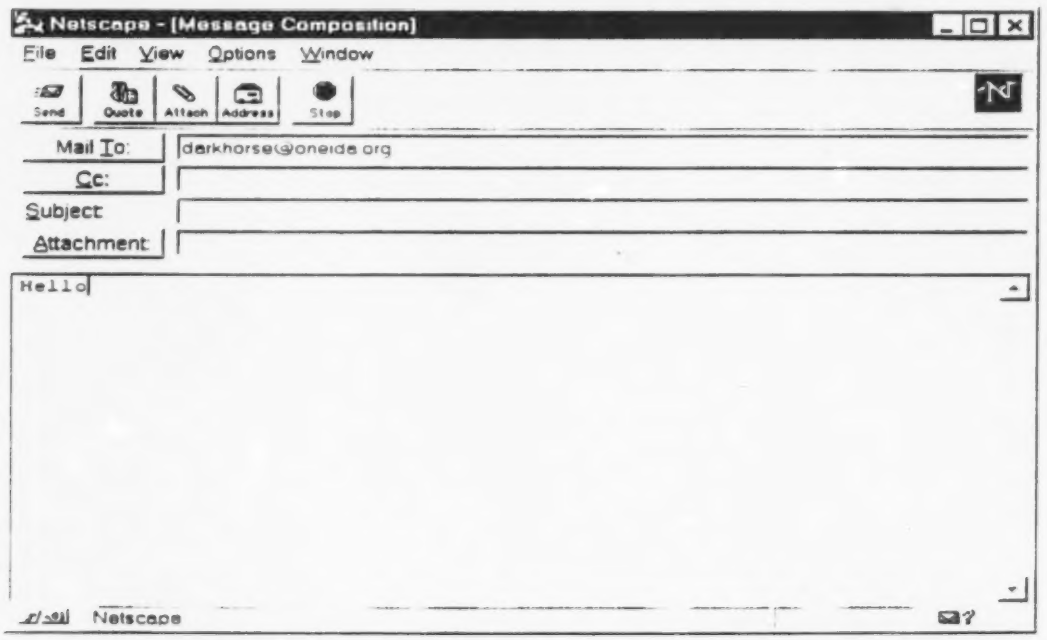
Shortly after my arrival at the Traditional Mohawk (Iroquois) Indian community in May of 1997, seven members began using the Netscape 3.0 E-mail system with steadily increasing frequency throughout the summer. I was interested to discover that these users immediately reported a very real and perceivable tension concerning the way they wanted things to "come out," "sound," or "feel" when using the medium. The tension described included the constraints and/or empowerments deriving from the software, and users' more general approaches to writing, expression, and communication. In this paper I'll explore just a few facets of that tension.

I began the project with a medium theoretic (deterministic) approach to media use - thinking I'd take the medium theorists to task. If skeptical, I had been intrigued by the claims of the media determinists since before graduate school. However, in some contrast to traditional medium theory (a la Innis, McLuhan, Goody, Eisenstein, Meyrowitz, etc.), which does not take into account the interplay between a technological medium and other "media" necessarily involved (i.e. language, culture, etc), that dialectical spin was added to my own methodological assumptions. Specifically, I assumed that, while the technology might have an impact on the Mohawk, they might simultaneously be impacting the technology with their own medium: a very rich kind of oral communication. Initially, then, the investigation was framed as a study of the confrontation between two media (oral culture and E-mail) and their respective "logics."

Oral culture and its attendant "logic" can be typified by sound, rhythm, formula, repetition, nonverbal behavior, and images which comprise a holistic web of synchronous information that, in turn, constitute a cultural system. Knowledge in the realm of orality comes about via close relationship to lived human experiences. Emotions and conflicts are "facts" of understanding that hold distinct meanings for the participants involved (c.f. Chesebro and Bertleson, 1996; p. 165). The holistic nature of real-time (synchronous), face-to-face oral exchange suggests that oral culture is non-reductive – it resists being reduced to discrete units of analysis. Electronic culture, on the other hand, is readily reducible to discrete units of analysis - typified by space, screen, keyboard control and (sometimes) audio manipulations which are cast from the outset as informational units (ibid). Electronic systems like E-mail create isolated micro- or sub-cultural systems. These systems are often depicted as asynchronous, non-social realms in which format determines consciousness and identity.

In a previous paper describing early stages of the fieldwork at the Mohawk community I considered the problem of categorization within a subject heading. That initial "demand feature"

of E-mail was shown to have been perceived as constraining to users in a number of ways (MacDougall, 1998a). The most common complaint dealt with the struggle to contain meanings, or "gists," in a single term or phrase. This seemed plausible enough. The subject field is a formal feature of the software that calls for the categorization of messages within a topical header. For these Mohawk, however, it represented an unusual demand which was immediately treated with considerable unease. Responses to the subject field during the first several months included the following: "What should I call this?" "What is the subject?!" "Subject...like topic?!" These questions arose in response to the dialogue window depicted in figure 1. (a random collection of entered subjects follows the figure).



[Figure 1 : Netscape 3.0 Subject Field and Composition Frame]

>Okwanle
>Okwanie
>Hello
>need info on...
>The Dream
>?????
>Okwanle
>Hello!

[Sampled E-mail Subjects: logged 7.02.97-10.20.97]

That first study concluded with speculations as to why this reported difficulty in fact caused them so much trouble. Several hypotheses were proffered. One suggestion was that, in keeping with users' verbal utterances, outward behavior seems not to reflect underlying

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categorical processes often attributed to the modern, "mainstream," media-reared westerner (i.e. sequential logic, pre-formed decision trees or other associated modes of cognition often dubbed "hierarchical" or "categorical" in nature). At that point, about four months into the fieldwork, I was still viewing user's interactions with E-mail from well within a medium-theoretic position. Extending the main tenets of medium theory to their logical conclusion, structural features should exist not only in the E-mail, but in the Mohawk (in their heads, their language, and their culture). That is to say, they should perceive, think and interpret differently than someone reared in the mainstream (mediated) culture that surrounded their traditional enclave.

An Odd Sense of Self: ferreting-out elements of Mohawkness

Initial interviews concerning the linear and sequential aspects of the medium, suggested users were displeased with the way the processor constrains an otherwise free-flowing, associative habit of thought. However, I was eventually surprised to find that this ended up not quite being the case. That is to say, they complained about the look and feel of the Netscape 3.0 environment in their early descriptions of it - but later qualified their remarks in light of continued use. In fact, Okwalhe and four of the younger individuals participating in the study seemed to grow more comfortable with the system in light of a specific composition strategy - something that I dubbed the *real-time/embedded* potential of E-mail.

>Hello there Les,

>Just a warning to you I am not yet too good at this computer.
>The book is almost complete except for a small article yet to
>be written by Watte about the Six Nations Mohawks who were
>the last to leave the valley. The book was not meant to be a
>book , but was supposed to be a pamphlet. When we began
>gathering the articles and information the pamphlet just wanted
>to be a book instead. The book will belong to the Lamastjoialake
>community. The proceeds will help the people here to continue
>our village. It will be one of the projects that will help promote our
>self-sufficiency. I have to go down to the craft store Les, someone is
>buzzing. I'll talk more with you soon.

>onen,
>Okwahle

[Real-Time/Embedded Style]

The message above, generated by Okwahle, the leader of the group, exemplifies this style. While he initially abides by the linearity and continuous sequence of the processor (uses E-mail in real-time), his style was deemed unique since he resists a certain "logical sequencing." Okwahle's style of E-mailing is noticeably different from some of the more assimilated Native users I encountered during the fieldwork. The example above can be characterized as representing a kind of *direct realism* (or *naive realism*) and is, as such, the least self-conscious of

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the three styles that were eventually discerned. The real-time/embedded style is typified by several features, including: nonstop (real-time) message production, ephemerality, free association and embeddedness (inclusion of ongoing local activity). While the *real-time/embedded* style seemed to be more prevalent at the Mohawk community, three message production strategies were identified on and off the premises. By no means are the three proffered as an exhaustive list – they merely represent a tentative schema based upon samples gathered at the Mohawk community, the State University, several private households, and two large corporations in the NYC area.

In general, the Mohawk adopted the medium as a continuous messaging system. They chose to ignore what many in the mainstream have come to value highly. It is, according to so many of my colleagues, friends and students, perhaps the most convenient (if not strategic) feature of the better E-mail systems: the ability to suspend a message in midstream – or, the *composed/suspended* style.

Messages representative of the composed/suspended style do not necessarily have a different appearance than those composed in an alternative fashion. The notable point is that they are written, edited and re-edited in multiple "sittings" over a period of time. Intervals range from minutes to several days. More often than not, however, the result tends to be a highly polished, grammatically flawless composition. A preliminary series of interviews off-site, with students, local residents, professors and professionals revealed that individuals typically adopt this style/strategy to (1) enhance his/her image within the medium; (2) increase the likelihood of achieving some very specific outcome; and/or (3) avoid "flaming" and a variety of other *tele-faux pas*. I was aware that, more than any other style, this is a distinctly self-conscious form of message production. The relatively unselfconscious way of being evidenced in the Mohawk E-mail samples had me feeling as though I was on track in terms of bolstering my dialectical spin on medium theory. Sure, I thought, there are demand features in the medium, but there are also features in the Mohawk that naturally resist those demands.

I described the third and last style of E-mailing as the *minimalist/task-driven* approach to composition. While often produced in real-time, this style was easily contrasted with the embedded nature or feel of E-messages recorded at the Mohawk community to date. The Minimalist/Task-driven style (sometimes also referred to as the telegraphic style) is a short, punctuated form that contains little or no social context information which works within, and even seems suited to the continuous linearity of the processor. Once again, messages of this type often have the appearance and feel of an "a > b > c", "if-then" or "flowchart" type composition.

In the mainstream, this is most prevalent on college campuses, between and in businesses (i.e., on intranets, LANs or other inter-office systems) and, somewhat counter-intuitively perhaps, even between the closest of friends:

(a.)
```
>Found the original.
>Will get that to you no later than Tuesday.
>So bring stats and title for meeting.
>Don't forget - 4 copies.
>-t
```

[Executive, SONY CORPORATION, NYC]

(b.)
```
>Yo Paco!

>Looks like we'll all hang this weekend.
>Don't tell Woody we got the tix.
>See what happens when they show up.

>Ciao,
>The Don
```

[Freshman, University at Albany]

(c.)
```
>Hey there Okwahle.

>Good to get your message.
>Yeah, the storm was real bad alright.
>We'll be heading up there soon.
>Say hello to everybody then.
>onen,  Jean
```

[Mohawk, Akwesasne Reservation, northern NYS]

Considering interplay between Medium and Cultural explanations.

Chances are, we have all produced messages in each of the three styles described above. Indeed, during a follow-up sampling one year into the study of the three off-site venues (college, businesses and private homes), I would discover that the real-time embedded style was much more prevalent than initially supposed. Again, I have to believe that preliminary investigations were biased to a degree by an intention on my part to find structural differences in the Mohawk compositions (suggesting such differences even in the Mohawk themselves). However, whether or not one puts any stock in the idea of some fundamental difference between these Traditional Mohawk and others in the main, there is little doubt that the Mohawk at least *saw* things differently. I would later be surprised to find Mohawk and non-Mohawk alike were exhibiting nearly identical E-mail practices.

It would become clear that conversations centering upon their interpretations (reading) as well as their productions (writing) of actual E-messages were the best ways to get them to talk about their relationship with the medium. But after another month of interviews and focus

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groups I found myself vacillating between the medium and cultural approaches. My group of (then seven) research participants were consistently using the technology. The question for me remained, more or less, as it had: "How can I explain their use given that they are Mohawk?"

The confusion I felt at this point can be approximated for the reader by considering the following descriptions (CJ's and Will's) from two very distinct vantages. First, read their words from the perspective of a media theorist: with the understanding that the medium is exerting a number of forces on the person. Then, read them again from the perspective of a cultural theorist: with the tentative understanding that the person is accounting for their interaction on the medium as the representative of a group that is aware of specific (essential?) properties of their own, and *should not be interacting with such things*.

"When you're having a talk you can't sit there and ask them to wait for you to figure out the best things to say. You gotta come out with it then and there. So I guess that's what I try to do on the E-mail," explains CJ, an Iron worker in his late twenties from the reservation who visits the community during the summer months and was just beginning to experiment with the medium last fall. Will, the resident potter, graphic design artist and painter remarks upon the phenomenon known to locals as "scheming," and in particular, what it means not to scheme:

> This is not just with computers though. When I do my art too - I think this is similar to the way I've always looked at other things - magazines, outside, nature, colors, and then shapes, and I don't remember thinking about anything in particular, it's just getting things down, I know inside of my head those ideas are coming out, but I can't really focus real good on those ideas. Once in a while I'll do a sketch. Just like on the computer. Sometimes I admit I do take a day or two to write a letter. Or I'll paint a sketch. Not very often I'll do that. I'm usually just real free...

The kind of forced self-reflexivity described by CJ and again by Will has been cited by most to be incommensurate with their typical way of feeling and communicating. The problem was that these and other statements were amenable to multiple interpretations. There is no question in my mind now that I was reading media theory into everything they said during the first six to twelve months of my work with the Mohawk.

Aware of studies like Lum (1996) and Umble (1996), who both suggest that a cultural or socio-structural framework accepts certain uses of a technology as "reasonable" or "sensible" given the values of the culture/interpretive group, I finally decided to rethink my assumptions. Both Umble (1996) who studied the use of the telephone in Amish and Old Order Mennanite

communities in Pennsylvania and Ohio, and Lum (1996) who studied Karaoke use by Asian Americans in New York, have suggested how certain, other (conventional?) uses of a technology can seem not-so-sensible. The accounts provided by Will, Chris and others at the community have suggested just that.

After completing another six months (now twelve in total) of fieldwork the cultural explanation was becoming more compelling. They were signaling to me that "what we see in our behavior is a product of our Mohawkness." But here again, I was becoming, in a sense, "seduced" by those data which seemed to support that explanation. This still suggested more about me (my interest in seeing them as special or different, and the way they talked about their usage around me) than it did about any systematic use of the technology. A combination of my new distaste for the initial media approach, and a kind of seduction resulting from my proximity to the phenomena, made the technology itself begin to appear transparent or superfluous, as the cultural factors became more dominant

The First Cultural Explanation: Wieder and Pratt

One key piece of research which redirected the goals of the study is the work of Carbaugh (1988, 1990) wherein ethnographic approaches reveal some of the many ways in which Americans position themselves culturally through the talk they engage in with others. More specifically, Weider and Pratt (in Carbaugh, 1990) use an ethnographic approach to study identity construction among American Indians. In that study, representatives from the Osage tribe (Pratt's own) were shown to invoke several of the more general features of "Indianness" (Wieder and Pratt's term) in their dealings with others. The authors discuss a kind of *cultural repertoire* that has been established over time to which Indians tacitly refer in order to *be Indian* at appropriate interactive junctures. However, it very soon became clear to me that Weider and Pratt's findings did not adequately account for goings on at the Mohawk community.

Nonetheless, Wieder and Pratt got me thinking. It is not that there weren't any essential Mohawk characteristics feeding into their E-mail behavior - rather, their phenomenology, their decision rules for recognizing who is, and who is not Mohawk vis-a-vis the technology is what best explains what's going on in terms of their Mohawkness. This recognition signaled a move away from the cultural and Whorfian-like / Linguistic interpretations, to a more interactionist interpretation.

Weider and Pratt's basic move is to suggest that *Interaction=Culture* (the culture and the cultural repertoire are exhibited in interaction) On this view interaction is rule based. The key

difference between Weider and Pratt's work and the present inquiry is that these Mohawk appear to have no such repertoire to refer to with respect to the interpretation of E-mail (as well as guidelines covering interaction through that medium). My conclusion was that E-mail is an, as yet, undefined, or uncoded artifact for these Mohawk. That is to say, they seem to be working out the meaning of the medium as they proceed - and seem to be attempting to do so from a cultural vantage point. I could live with this. But why are they recognizing, as Mohawk, features of their behavior that don't really appear to be Mohawk?! That is, why so these seem to be behaviors that we find elsewhere in the non-Mohawk world.

There are a couple of questionable problematic implications woven into Wieder & Pratt's interpretation given my experience with the Mohawk: (1) Wieder and Pratt posit essential or at least reified identity criteria; and (2) they are concerned primarily with what's going on inside people's heads. Wieder and Pratt are interested in attitudes, not behaviors. While they seem to be talking about communication in interaction, this is not communication from a truly interactionist vantage. Indians, say Wieder and Pratt, place an emphasis on a number of essential recognition cues. How do participant's know the rules? "Because they're Indian" say Wieder and Pratt – "because they've learned the rules through interacting with other Indians" (I paraphrase here).

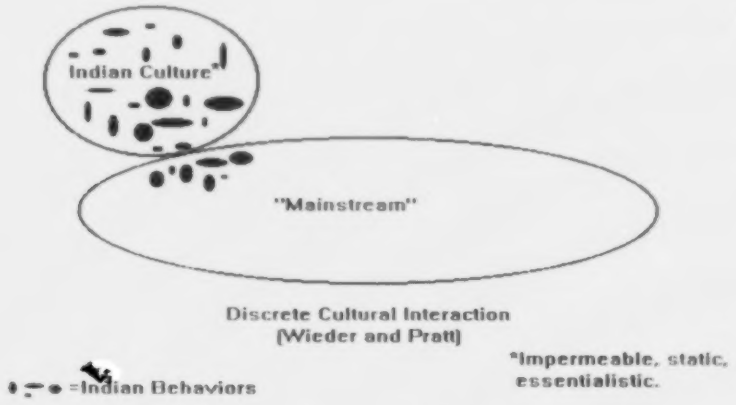
But this assessment fails in the Mohawk's case because their recognitions fail. They are unable to make the identifications. They misinterpret things as Mohawk when they are actually quite mundane, even universal behaviors. If their Mohawkness is anywhere, then, it would seem to be primarily in their heads. There thinking does not translate into any "typically Mohawk behaviors" while on E-mail. How do we know this? Because naive users elsewhere demonstrate similar behaviors. Therefore, the medium of E-mail regains significance. It becomes important once again because it helps us to see this identification error.

Extension of Cultural/Interactionist explanation - beyond Wieder and Pratt (Spontaneous Cultural Positioning)

Why do they claim some features to be Mohawk when these features are discoverable elsewhere? Wieder and Pratt would be unable to account for this. Maybe there is nothing essentially Mohawk going on here other than the fact that they've been prompted by this new technology (and perhaps me as researcher) to show something (anything?) as Mohawk. The two together force them to position themselves as Mohawk. So while they indeed seemed to be working out the meaning of the medium as they proceed - and seemed to be attempting to do so

from a cultural vantage point, that cultural vantage point is itself in-process (unfinished, unknown). In their having to provide responses to the prompts, constraints, and allowances of the technology (subject heading, composition window default, real-time stuff, etc.), and in response to me as "researcher" (whiteman from the big University) they have positioned themselves as Mohawk users of the technology.

What really excited me in all of this is that interaction here can still be seen as constrained by cultural rules (Wieder and Pratt), but also as generative. Meaning (with respect to the medium and themselves) is instantiated in interactions – along the way. While this new interaction is not itself constrained by cultural rules, there is nothing here which suggests that they are prohibited from making it a cultural rule. And so the behavior (composing in real-time, sharing the keyboard with a friend, adding in a bunch of events occurring while one types his or her message, etc.) becomes "Mohawk." Recall that Wieder and Pratt suggest *Interaction = Culture* (behavior is constrained/determined by culture). Given that, we can depict a discrete area designated "Indian Culture," from which the conventional behavior of the "Real" (essential) Indian originates (see Fig.2).



[Figure 2: Two Discrete (Real?) Cultures]

In this case, the behavior of the Real Indian is prescribed by the cultural repertoire. There can be no deviations from that repertoire - lest one is willing to jeopardize his or her status as a Real Indian. This repertoire represents a relatively narrow set of behavioral options. Now, while Wieder and Pratt suggest that these patterns predominate in Indian culture itself - between Real Indians - they do acknowledge the necessity of such behaviors in non-Indian venues. Given that, Fig. 2 illustrates how Real Indian behaviors may also occur outside Indian space - in the

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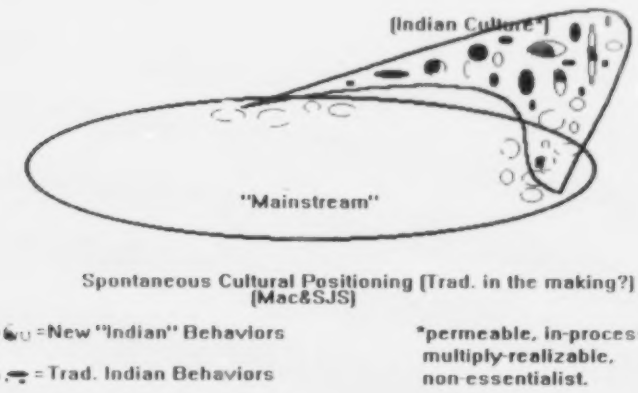
"mainstream" world. Nonetheless, these always remain Real Indian behaviors because they must necessarily draw on that original cultural repertoire. This includes: reticence with regard to interaction with strangers; the acceptance of obligations; razzing; attaining harmony in face-to-face relations; taking on familial relations; permissible and required silence; *etc.* (Wieder and Pratt, 1990).

The alternative formulation I want to proffer would suggest "Culture" to be a potentially infinite set of permeable/amorphous/unfinished (implying shifting and multiply-realizeable) "pockets of interaction" inside an area designated "Indian Culture." However, it is important to understand that Culture, in this case, is not a thing that exists in stability outside of interaction. The interaction constitutes the culture, stabilizing it. That much can be borrowed from Weider and Pratt.

This new perspective suggests that interaction triggers/induces cultural behavior (interaction with technology/with me/with the mainstream triggers the manifestation of something cultural). Consequently, we witness the emergence of new cultural behaviors. This leads to/allows new cultural definitions, assumptions and claims. Leads to new meanings of, in the present instances, Mohawkness (see Fig. 2).



[Figure 3: Spontaneous Positioning – Culture/Tradition in the Making?]

This is a more genuinely interactionist approach. In this case, it prevails over Wieder and Pratt's cultural explanation because these Mohawk do seem to make their culture emerge from the interaction (as opposed to the interaction being part and parcel to the culture - as in Weider

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and Pratt. Hence, a spontaneous cultural positioning. Interest here is focused upon actual behaviors emerging on the spot, in reaction to undefined prompts.[1]

One Analogy

Christmas time in the United States may prompt positioning behaviors in some groups of non-Christians. For instance, Chinese food and a movie has become something of a tradition for many Jewish Americans. Here again, a kind of "forced" positioning takes on a cultural semblance - becoming, as it were, a "traditional" behavior. They make it their own. Similar to the way many American Jews might say: "This is what we do on December 24th." Mohawks say: "this is what we do with E-mail." This may help account for the way marginalized cultural/ethnic groups change/adapt/cohere/develop/ survive over time. Far from being a cynical theory (as it may appear from a quick gloss), the suggestion here is that we are all potentially resilient and adaptable to the changing world in our efforts to find a place for ourselves in it. The present study lays the foundation for a pragmatic theory of identity construction and maintenance. The fact that my wife and I have gone out for Chinese food and a movie on the 24th detracts nothing from the meaning of that same activity for others. As seems to be the case regarding my own tendency, here and again, to incorporate E-mail messages with all kinds of "peripheral" information, I do not view our activity on the 24th as "anything special." But come to think of it, in both of the instances just mentioned, that just might be *my* problem.

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[1]. These undefined prompts can be thought of as "Xs". An "X " is something for which one does not have an immediate response. In the process of not having a response and trying to find one, cultural identity issues come to the surface (one is reminded of what one is supposed to be). When one finally responds, it takes the guise of a cultural response that is representative of "this" or "thatness."

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